

Seeing between the lines



BAGHDAD-BORN
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interdisciplinary
business for a long
time. (David Lerner)

Best known for his poetry, **Ronny Someck**, in his "Two Times Chai" exhibition, presents three dozen portraits that pay tribute to Israeli and non-Israeli Jewish poets and writers

• **BARRY DAVIS**

One epithet that springs to mind in the context of Ronny Someck is "groovy." While that may sound more than a little antiquated from an era in which such expressions as "cool" and "far out" were all the rage, and somehow it fits the man and the artist.

Someck is best known for his poetry, but is also a dab hand at producing visual works of art and, in fact, has exhibited in numerous leading galleries and museums both here and abroad.

His latest offering goes by the name of "Two Times Chai," referring to the combined double numerical value of the Hebrew letters *chet* and *chai*, which works out at 36. The show, which opened at Beit Avi Chai in Jerusalem last month, and will run until May 12, duly incorporates three dozen of Someck's cleverly constructed print-based works that pay tribute to Israeli and non-Israeli Jewish poets and writers whom Someck admires. Fittingly, the exhibition is curated by another poet, Amichai Hasek.

The Baghdad-born artist says he has been spending more time on his plastic-arts endeavor in recent years, and "Two Times Chai" is clearly no fly-by-night affair. "I studied drawing at the Avni Institute (in Tel Aviv), and Rafi Lurie was my teacher at high school." The latter was one of the keiric members of the Israeli arts community and a leader of the local version of the *Arte Povera* school of thought created in Italy in the 1960s, which challenged established ideas about how to go about creating works of art, and the new materials to be employed in the process.

Anyone who has read any of Someck's poetry can't help but be impressed with the energy of his writing. There is something very sack 'n' roll about his lines and imagery, so it's perfectly natural for him to take his hat off to the likes of Leonard Cohen, and to Leah Goldberg who wrote the lyrics for dozens of songs that have become Israeli classics.

In fact, Someck has been in the cross-disciplinary business for some time, having participated in a poetry-visual-art exhibition, together with now 80-year-old painter and sculptor Ferri Eilat,



back in the late 1980s. "I am in good company," notes Someck. "[Celebrated poet] David Avrián [pictured, and Leah Goldberg also pictured. [Iconic Russian-born poet and translator Shaul] Kheremichowky painted a bit, and Alexander Petru painted." Almost all the aforementioned writers are in the "Two Times Chai" lineup.

Even if you have no background knowledge of where Someck is coming from, the 36 framed works clearly convey the idea that – at the very least – he is sympathetic with various areas of creative endeavor.

Like much of Someck's own writing, there is a tongue-in-cheek sense to many of the poems, and the portraits are very much about the people themselves, as well as about their output. Goldberg, for example, who was a heavy smoker and worked very hard at her writing, is shown scribbling away with one hand, while four other hands hold cigarettes at jaunty angles. The multitude of arms is Someck's reference to Goldberg's talents across a range of literary arts.

Someck is not one to blow his own trumpet, and he is fully aware that most people identify him as an artist of the written word rather than as a creator of visual art, but he has the bona fide education backdrop. "The fundamental difference is that Leah Goldberg painted and made illustrations and even exhibited a bit, and [novelist and poet] Pinhas Sadeh included some of his own sketches in one of his books. But they related to that as something they did as an aside to the great [literary] works they produced – that we, the public, should know that they also have a good artistic hand."

Meanwhile, Someck attended the prestigious Avni Institute – now known as the Avni Institute of Art and Design – in Tel Aviv, and made sure he got a firm handle on the syntax and grammar of the plastic arts before laying pencil to



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paper. He also felt that a comprehensive creative ethos was required for his poetry excursions. "I won't write the word 'painter' on my business card – I might put 'artist' – but I went to Avni to study drawing, not painting, because I wanted to take full responsibility for the things I write. I thought that if I wrote the word, say, 'bard,' and I also drew it, I would be more committed toward the word 'bard.'"

In some quarters that might sound like something of a laissez-faire attitude toward drawing, but it worked.

"In those days, trying to gain admission to Avni was like applying to the [fabled] Juilliard School of music, dance and drama in New York." Someck recalls, painting a comic picture of the unusual nature of his interview for acceptance to the school. "There were all these other people, sitting outside with their big portfolios of the works they'd brought with them, and I go into the interview room with nothing to show. There were all these legends there – [painter] Yaskov Wechsler, [pioneering Israeli modernist painter] Michael Steinhilman and others – and they ask me where my portfolio is. There I was, sitting in front of all the greats of Israeli painting, and I tell them



I haven't got any works, and that I am a poet and that I want to learn to draw so that I can be more responsible toward the words I write."

During notwithstanding, that sounded like a sure recipe for being summarily slung out. But as the Latin proverb has it, fortune favors the bold, and Soneck was as fortunate as he was courageous.

"Luckily, the Friday before, a poem of mine had been published in the literary supplement of *Davar* [newspaper], and Wechsler had read it." It did the trick. "Wechsler said: 'I read your poem. You're in.' I leave the interview room, to go to register, and the other applicants could not figure out who this genius was who'd gone in for an interview with no portfolio but had been accepted." Soneck chuckles.

The visual sublimation of Soneck's texts was a seamless affair. "I'd spent five months fighting in the Yom Kippur War that was right at the end of my regular army service — and the army enabled me to take a year of studies at some academic institution, and I decided on Ams," he explains. "It was an amazing year for me. I realized that I was there to practice what I knew how to do in short punctuated lines. I'd come to see wings to my words."

Such an attitude might have aroused the ire, if not derision, of the students who had more serious intent toward their visual arts studies, but Soneck says the people around him were happy to go along with his flow. "Everyone knew why I was at the school, and I got a lot of help."

The literary-visual art disciplinary synergy proved to be a constant in Soneck's evolving oeuvre.

"I did an artist's book for the Venice Biennale a few years ago," he notes. "And I just did something at Kibbutz Kades, which was part of a project called the 'Hunger Rush.'"

The current showing embraces a

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broad spectrum of characters, in terms of the nature of their output and their origins. There are several Jerusalemites in there, including Israel Prize-winning poet Yehuda Amichai and fellow laureate 94-year-old Haim Gouss. There is also the odd not entirely "kosher" participant, such as French-Jew Marcel Proust, whose Catholic father was a prominent doctor and who, despite his Jewish lineage on his mother's side, was baptized, although he later declared himself an atheist. "We sort of justified him," laughs Soneck.

The portraits are, of course, filtered through Soneck's own understanding of the artists' works and perception of their personalities, but the viewer is left in no doubt as to where the subject is coming from.

The vibrant portrayal of the ever-humble Cohen, for example, shows the bearded troubadour with three hands.

"I added a hand because he is a kohen, because of *Yotaf Kohanim* [the priestly blessing]," Soneck explains, adding that he approached the project with great joy and zest and with a very personal take. "I felt as if I was reaching out for books which I love, by writers I love, and I am sort of corresponding with them."

Goldberg, who is depicted with even more hands than Cohen, also got the loving Soneck interpretative treatment. "Leah Goldberg is a novelist, a poet, a

playwright and an essayist, so I thought I would make her into something like an Indian goddess with lots of hands." The text that goes with the multiple-handed portrait comes from Goldberg's posthumously published book *Sh'rit Mahayan* and, specifically, a touching concise poem by the name of "Yeshiva."

The mostly monochrome Cohen sketch, which also sports four brightly colored stripes, cites a poem called "Thousands," from *Book of Looking*, which came out in 2006, and in which Cohen takes a typically self-deprecatory view of his own work.

Soneck was not involved in the textual choices and says he was happy to let that side of the exhibition go. "They [at Beit Avi Chai] selected the texts, and that was fine with me. They chose texts that all address the art of writing. Don't forget, the curator is a poet himself."

He says it was a harmonious and balanced process. "If I look at the project in a musical sense, it is as if I provided the lyrics, they brought a sort of music, and we did the arrangements together."

True to Soneck's persona, there is something basically funky about all the works. Take, for example, his rendering of Bohemian Russian-born poet Alexander Penn. While Hasson selected an excerpt from Penn's poem "Hahivot Madak" (The Subtle Difference), Soneck opted to splatter Penn's face with the text of another poem, "Always" (Love). The boldly scripted stanzas follow the contours of one side of the face, while the poet's richly dark eyes emanate a sense of his temperately romantic personality.

The style spectrum ebbs and flows across wide aesthetic tracts when we get to the striking likeness of Avraham Stern. Stern, of course, is best remembered as one of the leaders of the pre-state paramilitary organization Irgun Zvai Leumi. However, he also wrote poems, many of which were impassioned expressions of his longing for a Jewish

homeland. That fervor comes across in Soneck's portrait of Stern, which incorporates some surrealist and avant-garde elements that serve to heighten the visual bottom line.

Soneck's take on 90-year-old Iraqi-born writer Sami Michael has the bespectacled writer smoking a cigarette as he peeps out at us with a look that evades a seasoned laid-back demeanor, while the full lips and eddying cigarette smoke suggest something of the foreboding of a film noir.

The text for the Michael picture is taken from an interview he gave in 2001, in which he talks about the challenge he faced, after making aliyah, in making the transition from writing in his mother tongue, Arabic, to Hebrew, and how each side viewed his Arabic-language work with suspicion.

While he was delighted when the idea of the exhibition came up, and says he always feels warmly received by Beit Avi Chai, Soneck was conscious of the disciplinary divide he would have to straddle.

"I say to the viewer, after choosing to present them with poets, writers and philosophers, you know these people and you have your own opinion about them; here's what I think about them. And I present them with my thoughts, not in writing but with a drawing. This prompts debate. The poet will say that the word is worth a thousand pictures, and the artist will always say that the picture is worth a thousand words. I offer my work, but I say to the viewer, look at the picture and see where your imagination takes you."

Soneck, like any artist, would like us to spend time with his work and see where it takes us. "George Orwell, in his essay *Shooting an Elephant*, writes: 'He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.' In my drawings I present people [subjects] with a mask, and I see how the faces grow into them. That goes for the observer, too." ■